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Categories, Crossroads, Control, Connectedness, Continuity, and Change: A Metaphorical Exploration of COVID-19

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Introduction

Charles Eisenstein (2020) has recently described COVID-19 as being "like a rehab intervention that breaks the addictive hold of normality." By contrast, in one of his regular addresses to the nation during the period of lockdown,[1] the U.K. Prime Minister, Boris Johnson euphemistically talked of COVID-19 as being "a mugger that we are collectively just beginning to wrestle to the ground." These metaphors offer vivid and evocative ways of characterizing the virus and, in doing so, they do a lot more than act as simple "poetic embellishments" (Grant & Oswick, 1996). As Lakoff and Turner (1989) put it: "Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought—all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death" (p. xi).

The images of "going through rehab" and "being mugged" convey very different "ways of thinking" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). On the one hand, the "crisis *as* rehab" metaphor foregrounds the notion of a fresh start; a shift away from the dysfunctional normality of addiction (i.e., as *an opportunity* for change). On the other hand, the "crisis *as* mugger" metaphor is about tackling and subduing an aggressor to restore order; trying to return to normality (i.e., overcoming *a threat* to reestablish continuity).

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In this contribution, we will argue that these contrasting metaphors are surface level illustrations of a deeper underlying process of metaphorical bifurcation (these illustrations being "threat vs. opportunity" and "change vs. continuity"). We believe that interrogating the metaphorical connotations associated with COVID-19 enables us to say something about the different underlying "cognitive processes" that are in play (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), reveals different contrasting conceptual categories (Lakoff, 1987), and surfaces the metaphorical imperatives, which prescribe different forms of response and action (Grant & Oswick, 1996).

There are three main parts to this article. First, we highlight and discuss a recurring and dominant metaphor that privileges aspects of continuity, establishing control, and a postcoronavirus return to normality (i.e., a normative-normal). Second, we examine an alternative metaphorical framing that privileges change, increased collaboration, and a revised version of normal (i.e., a new-normal). Finally, we briefly discuss the implications of the competing postcrisis views of normality.

Another War: Back to Normative-Normal?

Several days after the 9/11 attack on The World Trade Center, George Lakoff (2001) wrote a poignant piece that metaphorically equated a building to a person standing and describes the plane going into South Tower as being like "an image of a bullet going through someone's head, the flame pouring out from the other side blood spurting out" and as "each tower fell, it became a body falling." He suggests that this shocking imagery helped shape and legitimate the U.S. government's response to 9/11 as a "war on terror." The idea of a "war on terror" is unquestionably a metaphorical construction. You cannot literally wage a war against terror. Terror is not a tangible entity. Even if we apply some conceptual latitude and argue that it was just a different way of saying a "war against terrorists," it is still nonsensical to wage a war, in the literal sense, against an amorphous collection of individuals who do not have a country to defend or material assets that can be seized. Like a war on terror, a war on COVID-19 is problematic. Can you wage a war against a virus?

It would seem that a typical response to perplexing challenges is to enlist the war metaphor. So, why is this metaphor evoked? Eisenstein (2020) perhaps offers us a clue when he observes:

> If there is one thing our civilization is good at, it is fighting an enemy. We welcome opportunities to do what we are good at, which prove the validity of our technologies, systems, and worldview. And so, we manufacture enemies, cast problems like crime, terrorism, and disease into us-versus-them terms, and mobilize our collective energies toward those endeavors that can be seen that way.

There is something inherently appealing about the process of "othering" that the war metaphor enables in a crisis. It facilitates absolving ourselves of any responsibility for the crisis, and it provides a unifying and explicit focal point for action against an external agent whether it is a mugger, terrorist, or virus. Most of all, deploying the war metaphor is reassuringly familiar. It is what we do in a crisis to reestablish control and

a sense of agency. It is a normative version of normal. Unfortunately, history tells us that this normative response to a crisis is relatively ineffectual (Weick, 2006).

The "war on terror" following 9/11 has not reduced terrorist incidents or improved global security. Arguably, the strategy has actually had an adverse impact by increasing resistance and contributing to the radicalization of disenfranchised Muslims (Lakoff, 2001). Moreover, the war on terror is ineffectual because it targets the effects of terrorism (i.e., terrorists) and does not meaningfully address the causes of terrorism (i.e., the social and cultural circumstances that create terrorists). The same is true of the war on crime. Incidence of crime are increasing and prison numbers are growing. The war on crime is simply not working. With its emphasis on getting tough on criminals, it focuses attention on the effects of crime rather than on tackling the deeper causes of crime such as social inequality, poverty, and deprivation. For the same reasons, the war on COVID-19 with its emphasis on medical treatment, self-isolation, and social distancing emphasizes tackling the effects of the virus rather than exploring and addressing the complex repertoire of underlying causes that would help avoid or ameliorate future pandemics.

Connectedness and Community: Toward a New-Normal?

We might expect that lockdowns, self-isolation, and social distancing would result in less social connectedness and less community-based activity (Tannen, 2020). Certainly, at the time of writing, there is far less direct personal contact and only virtual social gatherings. However, what we are perhaps witnessing during the pandemic is a significant perceptual and philosophical shift, which involves a figurative reframing, or metaphorical recategorization, of notions of connectedness and community. It is a move beyond "literal" physical connection to incorporate the more abstract idea of an implicit, "collective connectedness" (i.e., global community). This sense of connectedness can be attributed to the pervasiveness of the virus and the fact that it is worldwide shared experience.

The idea of a "global community" is metaphorical because we feel more emotionally connected, rather than literally connected, to others around the world. And, we have a more globalized and generic "sense of community" rather than simply being part of a literal and discernible community.

There are a number of factors driving the formation of this collective sense of connectedness and community. For instance, Klinenberg (2020) posits that we are " . . . seeing the market-based models for social organization fail, as self-seeking behaviour (from Trump down) makes this crisis so much more dangerous than it needed to be" and that the " . . . coronavirus pandemic marks the end of our romance with market society and hyper-individualism." The effect of big pharma is highlighted by Sterling (2020): "The coronavirus has laid bare the failures of our costly, inefficient market-based system for developing, researching and manufacturing medicines and vaccines." Family care is implicated by Poo (2020): "The coronavirus pandemic has revealed gaping holes in our care infrastructure, as millions of American families have been forced to navigate this crisis without a safety net."

How a "new-normal" will manifest itself is difficult to accurately predict. Schrad (2020) believes we will witness a new kind of patriotism. He asserts,

> America has long equated patriotism with the armed forces. But you can't shoot a virus. . . . Maybe the de-militarization of American patriotism and the love of community will be one of the benefits to come out of this whole awful mess. (Schrad, 2020)

Other commentators have suggested that the lived experience of the pandemic and what it has revealed about deficiencies in society will lead to increased and active interest in democracy and politics (Fung, 2020; Rauch, 2020; Sterling, 2020). A few have gone even further in terms of claims about activism, mobilization and social movements (Eisenstein, 2020). Indeed, O'Neil (2020) has suggested, "The aftermath of the coronavirus is likely to include a new political uprising—an Occupy Wall Street 2.0, but this time much more massive and angrier."

Concluding Remarks

Metaphors matter. The "war" metaphor and the "global connectedness/community" metaphor both present seductive and persuasive ways of conceptualizing and responding to COVID-19, albeit in very different ways. Although they offer diametrically opposed representations of the problem and the solution, they are not mutually exclusive. Like it or not, the war metaphor is set to endure and will continue to be evoked in future crises. That said, rather than foregrounding the attendant characteristics of war—such as aggression, defensiveness, parochial self-interest, territorialism, and othering—we have a real opportunity to privilege alternative metaphors. As Taylor (2020) puts it, we have: " . . . an unprecedented opportunity to not just hit the pause button and temporarily ease the pain, but to permanently change the rules so that untold millions of people aren't so vulnerable to begin with." A metaphor that encourages new way of thinking; one which is inclusive, caring, supportive, collaborative, democratic and connects people, has the potential to facilitate new ways of acting and being in society. This in turn creates scope for the emergence of an exciting, constructive, and genuinely new "new-normal" in a postpandemic world.

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1. Boris Johnson speaking on *Coronavirus Daily Update*, BBC1 TV, 27th April, 2020.

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